



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

### **Defence Cooperation between Russia and China**

**Chairperson:** Dr. Puyam Rakesh Singh, Associate Fellow, CAPS

**Speaker:** Ms Chandra Rekha, Associate Fellow, CAPS

**Discussant:** Dr. Poonam Mann, Associate Fellow, CAPS

**Rapporteur:** Dr. Pamreihor Khashimwo, Research Associate, CAPS

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The restored defence collaboration between China and Russia today has reached a 'middle path' to explore the prospects of robust defence partnership in contemporary global affairs. There are four key aspects that can be identified in defence cooperation between Russia and China (a) a major economic source (b) foreign policy tool, (c) preserve security interests and (d) power projection as strategic allies. The current defence partnership between the two countries is a perfect synchronisation of economic power and military power to promote their common defence objectives. The impact of the 2014 economic sanctions on Russia post Crimea accession and China's desperation to move forward in defence technology has led the two countries to confederate with each other. The merger of strategic interests and concerns has paved the way for the two countries to further enhance their defence engagement. The trends in the defence engagement between the two nations can be summed up in the following four phases:

### **Phase I: Defence Cooperation during Soviet Era (1949-1991)**

The signing of the Sino-Soviet Union, Alliance and Mutual Assistance Treaty in 1950 led to an arrangement between Soviet Union and China for economic and military assistance. Soviet Union became a dominant supplier of weapons to China. China too emerged as one of the largest defence partners of Soviet Union. The defence cooperation between the two countries also aimed to create a balance of power in the superpower bloc game. China's quest to join the nuclear club with the help of the Soviets became one of the critical factors responsible for the deterioration in relations between the two communist countries. The 1960s clash of interests and border confrontation resulted in the emergence of 'phobia' that eventually resulted in seeing each other as the biggest threat. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan further aggravated Chinese concerns about possible Soviet expansion in Asia and kept them on high alert. The tension in 1969 over the border dispute resulted in both Soviet and Chinese armed forces facing each other across the world's longest border as 'enemies'. The biggest blow during the Sino-Soviet split was in defence cooperation. Post Tiananmen Square Western governments severed defence ties with Beijing and imposed arms embargos and other sanctions."

The impact on defence cooperation during the hostile relations between the Soviet Union and China was mainly endured by China and not so much by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union developed closer ties with another major Asian defence market —India. The short-lived rapprochement between China and the US did not yield the required strategic payoffs for China; this left Russia as the only potential source for the purchase of high-tech military equipment for China. The confidence gained by China post joining the nuclear club resulted in Beijing seeing itself at par with the Soviet Union and the US. China also gained the confidence of becoming a self-reliant nation in its defence capabilities through large-scale indigenisation. The collapse of the Soviet Union became a defining moment

### **Phase II: Post Soviet Collapse (1991-2000)**

With regards to the defence cooperation between Russia and China in the 1990s, the main source of financial assistance came from the defence orders assigned by India and China. In 1994, a "constructive partnership" was announced by Russia and China which was

followed up by “strategic partnership” in 1996. The DIC post-Soviet disintegration in the 1990s was also crippled due to injudicious reforms introduced during this period. Russia and China institutionalised their defence engagements, also, China had vastly inferior military equipment compared to the rest of the emerging global players. The global aspirations and desire to maintain status quo in Asian region made the Chinese grow desperate to maintain large-scale military power with advanced defence capabilities. Hence, China sought to modernize its defence.

Iraq war was a wake-up call to many countries including China regarding the threat on the impact of lag in military modernisation and capabilities. China began military modernization in earnest after the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crises, an event that exposed fundamental weaknesses in China’s ability to deter foreign intervention. The PLA sought Russian arms for several reasons: Russia was one of the few countries willing to sell weapons to China following the arms embargo by the West; Russian arms were compatible with the PLA’s Soviet-era equipment, and Russian weapons were relatively cheap compared to those from the West. Meanwhile, as the Russian economy teetered in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, huge orders from China helped keep a once-mighty defence industry afloat.

### **Phase III: Influence of Revival of Russian Defence Industry (2000-2014)**

By the end of the 1990s, the new regime led by Vladimir Putin focussed on the comprehensive development of the country including a major military transformation. In the context of the influence of a revamped Russian defence industrial complex on the strengthening of Russia-China defence cooperation, Russia attempted to use its military-technical cooperation strategy towards countries such as China, Brazil and South Korea, each country featuring targeted specifics. The ‘Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation’ signed in 2001 enhanced the relations further alongside the resolution of the border dispute in 2004 (the agreement was implemented later in 2008).

After normal relations with Moscow were re-established, Beijing resumed buying Russian technologies to upgrade its defence sector. Overcoming the ‘phobia’ of seeing each other as a potential threat, the 2001 treaty stated that if either party felt their security interests

were threatened, the two countries would establish consultations. The two nations also conducted a number of larger exchanges and engagements. The best known are the major biennial military exercises that they have been holding since 2005. In addition, the Chinese side began to increase purchases of Russian weapons and equipment, eventually becoming the largest buyer of similar products produced in Russia.

However, the peak sales of Russian weapons to the PLA fell in 2005-2006, after which interaction between the two nations in the field of defence began to decline. In terms of the defence cooperation during this phase, there were two major blows for Russia, (a) China's indigenisation of its defence industry by 2005 and (b) Technological theft by China. China copied the airframe of the Su-27SK and Su-33 to create the J-11B and J-15 respectively and offered the copied design on the export market. The reverse engineering of Russian weapons left a dent in the trust factor in the defence engagement.

#### **Phase IV: Transformed Defence cooperation since 2014-2017**

The defence cooperation between Russia and China, especially since 2014, has transformed into a more institutionalised and intense engagement. The recent developments in the current defence cooperation are the enhanced military-technical cooperation, power projection through large-scale joint military exercises and more importantly, the sale of advanced weapons technology to China.

As for military-technical cooperation, China has devoted greater focus towards indigenisation of its defence industry but continues to struggle to manufacture pioneering defence technology/equipment except in few areas such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV). The domestic production does not totally suffice China's defence requirements for its military preparedness. Russia in this context becomes the 'surrogate' to address the challenges of Chinese defence requirements. China has become more desirous of getting its hand on Russia's military wherewithal to enable China to preserve its regional and global interests and security. On the other hand, the hostility between Russia and the West since the Ukraine imbroglio (2014) and the impact of economic sanctions has come as a boon for China.

Today, Russia and China have reconstructed their defence engagement that has surpassed even the Soviet era level of interaction. China, for now, prefers to be an 'import' dependent nation of Russia's defence market until its defence industry has made headway in advanced weapons technology. The combination of a continental power- Russia and an expanding Chinese maritime interest is a major threat to US interests and security. Russia-China defence cooperation is on an upward trend despite the challenges that exist in this sphere of engagement. The two countries are set to boost their defence cooperation in the coming years. Also, Russia enjoys a forward-looking strategic partnership with China; it will never put down its guard given the 1969 military tension faced by these two prominent Cold War allies.

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